

## **MacArthur High School in the 1950s**

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High school in the 1950s was distinctly different than high school today. The most impressive difference lies in the social interaction between students. There were differences in racial relations, forms of entertainment, and dating

In the early 1950s schools across the country followed the idea of "separate but equal", meaning that though blacks and whites were in separate schools they were getting the same education. Hence, they were "equal". Segregation was not looked upon as a problem until later in the decade. Donna Crisel of Granite City, Illinois, recalls her experiences at MacArthur High School in Decatur, Illinois. "There were very few blacks in the school. We didn't hang out with them. I was friends with one black girl when I was younger. I remember thinking that her family was very strange and different."

Segregation did gradually disappear within schools even during the Fifties. However, that did not mean that the African-American students were treated equally. Susan Cook of Decatur, Illinois, also attended MacArthur High School in Decatur. "When we [Susan and her siblings] were in grade school, the schools were still all white. So, when we got into high school and there were blacks, we didn't know how to interact with them" To the average white person in high school in the 1950s black people weren't "cool" to be around.

Forms of entertainment in the 1950s were distinctly different than they are today. High school students in the 1950s could not just go home and play video games for a few hours and then talk to their friends on the Internet before bed. The most popular places for teenagers to congregate in the 1950s were "ice cream parlors, pizza parlors, drive-ins, bowling alleys, coffee houses and record shops". Mrs. Crisel explained what she and seven siblings did for fun. "We weren't a particularly wealthy family. There were only four rooms in our house and if you stayed inside, mother would make you clean something; so we all stayed out until dark. We played with the neighbors. My dad made us stilts out of wood. I remember when the neighbors down the street got a color T.V. They were the only ones on the block and we would go over and watch 'American Bandstand'."

According to research by Becky Bradley of the Kingwood College library, "In the early fifties teenagers spent more time watching TV than they did going to school". When I asked her about what she did on the weekends she replied "on Friday nights there were movies for really cheap, maybe a nickel, I don't really remember, I just remember that we would all get in the back of the truck and go see the show." Susan Cook is Donna Crisel's sister, so her response was somewhat similar.

Dating in the 1950s was probably the most distinctly different aspect of social life. Boys always asked girls on dates, not the other way around. If a couple was "going

steady", there was always an exchange of something, a ring or a jacket. Boys always paid for things and always picked up the girls. Also, high schools were very active in promoting the right idea about dating to their students. Mrs. Crisel and her sisters had a few boyfriends in high school. Mrs. Crisel spoke about one in particular: "He was a cute athletic boy and he came to our house. My brothers and my dad were all there to greet him at the door. He had to sit in the living room and talk to my dad for a few minutes before we were allowed to leave. My dad was really intimidating. Anyway, after that we went and saw a show. I don't exactly remember what the show was, but I do remember not being able to go anywhere afterwards since I had to be home by eleven p.m. Anyway, so we pulled up into the driveway and we were a few minutes early. So we sat and listened to the radio and talked. I leaned in to kiss him and the light on the porch flashed that it was time to come in. I was really embarrassed when I walked in because my dad had been watching through the window. This was fairly common in the 1950s. Most girl's parents would make sure that they met a boy before the girl could go out with them. There was a lot of protocol involved with dating in the 1950s due to the clean image that people wanted to maintain. They taught this protocol in high schools during the 1950s through films shown in classes. Girls also took classes explaining what is expected of a girl when she is in the company of a boy.

High school is the social hub of teenage lives. In the 1950s students in high schools were dealing with race issues, watching a good deal of television and movies, and

dating in the most respectable way. [From “American Cultural History”, Kingwood College Library at [www.kclibrary.nhmccde.edu/decade50.html](http://www.kclibrary.nhmccde.edu/decade50.html) (Oct. 19, 2004); *Chicago Tribune*, Jan. 11, 1890, Jan. 1, 1950, Feb. 4, 1950; Index Fifties Web, [www.fiftiesweb.com](http://www.fiftiesweb.com) (Nov. 1, 2004); Windy Sombat, “Teenage Dating in the 1950s,” [honors.umd.ed/HONR269J/projects/sombat.html](http://honors.umd.ed/HONR269J/projects/sombat.html) (Nov. 1, 2004); Student Historian’s interview with Susan Cook (Oct. 30, 2004); Student Historian’s interview with Donna Crisel, Oct. 31, 2004.]